

For a Can of Caviar

By Ltjg. Joey Tanner

Our detachment was involved in a joint NATO exercise, conducting ASW operations in the Baltic Sea near Denmark and Sweden. My crew was scheduled for two bags that February night. We completed the first flight with no hiccups and came back to our ship to receive fuel about 0100. We only had about six-percent illumination that night, and the crew was a little tired from the first three hours on night-vision goggles.

After working out some communications problems with the ship and being refueled, we took off at 0130 to practice more ASW against a Kilo-class submarine. The area we were working in was quite busy, with at least five ships and multiple aircraft conducting operations.

Initially, the flight was uneventful. At about 0200, I mentioned to my HAC that I saw some clouds

building up below us around 400 feet. We didn't pay much attention to them and decided to press on with the mission.

We have all heard that being on goggles makes it easier to get into inadvertent IMC, and, that night, I found this premise to be true. Ten minutes after we first spotted the clouds, we found ourselves going in and out of the goo at 400 feet. Just then, our anti-submarine tactical air controller (ASTAC) on the ship came over the radio and said the ship was experiencing low visibility because of surface fog and had set the low-visibility detail. My HAC decided we should head back before things got any worse. After the ship set flight quarters, we shot our first approach on instruments and goggles. We couldn't get below 400 feet; the fog was extremely thick from the surface up to about 600 feet.

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We set up for another try and came down to 200 feet. At two-tenths of a mile and 200 feet, the fog was so thick the ship's masthead light barely was visible, even on goggles. When we realized we most likely were not going to make it back to the boat anytime soon, we climbed and started planning for a divert to an airfield in Denmark. We shared our plan with our NATO allies, and they helped find a clear spot in the weather. We also had our ship check better weather to aid our return on board.

We began to notice our fuel state. We were about 40 to 50 miles from the divert field in Denmark but had no information on it other than the location and frequencies. From our publications in the aircraft and from our NATO allies, we learned the field we were trying to reach was closed at night. We already were on our way there and decided to keep heading inbound to the field. As we neared land, we saw that the entire landmass surrounding the airfield was enclosed in fog. With the airfield being closed, we had no way of shooting any type of approach. Considering the [weather](#) and our ever [decreasing fuel state](#), we now were committed to landing.

From above 1,000 feet, we didn't see an opening in the fog the ship would have reached. Our NATO allies immensely helped out by providing a frequency for the local air-traffic controller. We continued inbound for the airfield, hoping to find an open spot to visually let down. As we got closer, we saw the weather wasn't going to allow us to land at the Denmark field. We told the controller of our capabilities: We were getting low on fuel, and we would need a field with a precision approach.

After a few minutes, the controller told us a Swedish air force base with a PAR was about 70 miles from our position. We did a fuel check and decided if we shut down one engine, we could make it to that field with time for one, maybe two, approaches. We also declared emergency fuel and turned our transponder to 7700.


I am not ashamed to say it is an humbling and scary thing the first time you squawk emergency for real. I also was shocked to realize we were going to pull off one of our engines to save gas. We discussed this action as a crew and then shut down our No. 2 engine. We now were in and out of the clouds, low on fuel, with one engine, and still 70 miles away from a field where we

could land. All this time, my HAC was focused on communicating with the ship and flying. I was talking to approach and the airfields, as well as updating our navigation information. Our crewman helped me with the fuel calculations and gathered information. Even though we were in a tough spot, I believe we all felt the crew was working together extremely well, and we handled the problem with the utmost efficiency.

We told the controller we were headed to the Swedish air force base, and he began to coordinate with them. They actually were closed at the time, but they called in their people to recover us. We now were about 30 minutes from the field, with roughly 45 minutes of fuel remaining. We trekked back out over the water and headed north. With the NVGs, we could see the coastline of Sweden from about 30 miles away. The fog bank looked to be stopped right at the coastline. About five minutes later, the airfield was lit up, and we had it visually from almost 20 miles. We told the ship we had the airfield in sight and were headed in. We also let the controller know we had the field in sight; he handed us off to the tower controller.

We took a visual approach and landed at 0500, with about 15 to 20 minutes of fuel remaining. The Swedes were extremely helpful with everything, even providing us a place to sleep. By 1600 the next afternoon, we were headed back to our ship, arriving around 1730—safe and sound.

Many things caught us by surprise that night. A combination of help from our ship and allies, assistance from our controller, flawless crew coordination, and maybe a little luck [*Don't get me started on relying on "a little luck" to be safe—Ed.*] helped us make it to a field before running out of fuel. My HAC made great decisions and solicited input from the rest of the crew. I was focused on the communications and navigation. Our crewman, a junior AW3 with only limited flight time, kept his cool and contributed more than expected.

While it sounds like a cliché, I never will take for granted being able to land back at the boat in case of trouble. I also now take the time to really see what our divert options are and what we will do in case of a similar situation. 

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